

VZCZCXRO8466
PP RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHBK #3174/01 3510337
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 170337Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9315
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7794
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0251
RUEHKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR 7975
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6046
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2175
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0235
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 7418
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE 0409
RHEFDHS/DIA DHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003174

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP, S/GWI FOR YU

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KTIP](#) [KWMN](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR FOR GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES MELANNE
VERVEER RENEWS RELATIONSHIPS IN THAILAND

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11. (U) Summary: Ambassador for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer's December 4-7 visit to Thailand energized RTG and NGO interlocutors on women's issues and highlighted the invaluable role USG initiatives play in promoting women's empowerment in Thailand. During the first leg of her trip in the northern province of Chiang Mai, Ambassador Verveer sat down with female activists and journalists involved in the Burmese exile community and visited projects that promote the economic empowerment of women and vulnerable populations. In Bangkok, Ambassador Verveer held productive discussions with officials from the Ministry of Justice and local grassroots NGOs, and hosted a luncheon for UN agency representatives in Thailand.

12. (SBU) Comment: Ambassador Verveer's visit highlighted the vital importance of the work being done to promote the full range of women's issues, including gender-based violence against refugees on the Burmese border, and the RTG's work in the UN to develop standardized rules governing the treatment of women prisoners. Ambassador Verveer was able to build on her previous visits to Thailand to demonstrate the important role that women's issues play in foreign policy - in all sectors and throughout every population. End Summary and Comment.

RENEWING TIES IN CHIANG MAI

13. (SBU) While in Chiang Mai December 5-6, Ambassador Verveer visited the New Life Center (NLC), a shelter for women and girls who are victims of human trafficking, sexual violence or otherwise at risk for exploitation. NLC staff noted that trafficking for sexual exploitation to traditional brothels had markedly decreased, especially among the Thais. However, many adolescent girls, especially from Burma, were still being trafficked to karaoke bars, massage parlors and other establishments. NLC staff told Ambassador Verveer that many of such establishments were located in rural areas along Thailand's borders with Laos and Burma, where law enforcement was not as well-developed. Ambassador Verveer commented on the sizeable expansion of the NLC's empowerment programs since her last visit over a decade ago, and thanked Director Karen Smith, NLC staff, and the shelter residents for their warm reception. Ambassador Verveer praised NLC as a strong

USG partner, noted that as the recent recipient of a G/TIP grant, the strong collaboration was poised to continue.

14. (SBU) During a December 5 lunch meeting with prominent Burmese women activists from the Burma Relief Center, Shan Women's Action Network, the Karen Women's Organization, and the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand, the participants decried the use of rape as a tool of war by the Burmese regime and described in graphic detail several abhorrent incidents. They urged Verveer to pay more attention to violence against women, particularly in ethnic areas, and Ambassador Verveer outlined existing USG initiatives to combat this problem. Ambassador Verveer was particularly interested in those organizations' empowerment and capacity building programs on the border. She further suggested that the USG could potentially help identify funding for the purchase of communications equipment, such as satellite phones, to allow residents in conflict areas to tell their story to the outside world. She commended all the women for their bravery and emphasized the Secretary's personal interest in their plight. At the conclusion of the lunch, she distributed autographed photos of the Secretary to all attendees.

15. (U) Following the lunch and a roundtable discussion with journalists from the Irrawaddy (the leading magazine outside Burma covering Burmese-related issues) and the Shan Herald Agency for News, Ambassador Verveer paid a visit to the Integrated Tribal Development Project, which has helped countless Hill Tribe families in Northern Thailand switch from opium to coffee production. The bulk of the coffee is now sold to Starbucks and a local Chiang Mai cafe; Verveer praised the project's ability to economically empower highlanders.

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BACK TO BANGKOK

16. (U) During the G/TIP conference for EAP and SCA posts held in Bangkok on December 7 and 8, conference attendees watched a video from Secretary Clinton, in which she discussed her visit to the NLC as First Lady and described the profound impact interaction with trafficking victims at NLC had made on her life. Following the video, Ambassador Verveer shared her detailed recollections from that 1996 visit to NLC as well as experiences from her just completed trip to Chiang Mai during her opening remarks. Ambassador Verveer's remarks focused on how the USG and the Secretary became involved in the TIP issue, and the importance of continuing USG's leadership on this issue in the world.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE MEETING

17. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer met with relevant Ministry of Justice (MOJ) representatives on December 7 to discuss the full range of women's issues they address. The MOJ has worked closely with Princess Bajrakitiyabha, daughter of the Crown Prince, since 2008 on the ELFI (Enhancing Lives of Female Inmates) Project. This collaboration triggered Thailand's decision to propose draft UN rules on the treatment of women prisoners, and Ambassador Verveer discussed the procedural progression of the draft UN rules, possible areas of collaboration related to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as the current violence against women debates in the UN. While praising these RTG international efforts, Ambassador Verveer emphasized that Thailand's domestic policies needed to remain consistent with its commitment to human rights. After she was briefed on Thailand's domestic violence law, Verveer encouraged MOJ officials to visit the United States for consultation and training, and urged them to work with the S/GWI office in the future.

¶8. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer met December 7 with a with a small cross section of the sizeable NGO community involved in addressing women's issues in Thailand. The local grassroots Friends of Women (FOW) Foundation described its work in curbing violence against women. FOW then introduced a domestic violence survivor, who shared her experiences and told Ambassador Verveer that she had devoted herself to helping other women. Verveer asked the FOW representatives about their strategies for engaging men in their efforts, and they described their successful "Less Drinking Less Violence" campaign, noting that it was launched after extensive research had established the connection between alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Verveer expressed admiration for the group's use of mainstream media outlets, including Marie Claire magazine, to share survivor stories, and requested that they provide English translations of some of their materials to her office so they could be shared with others.

¶9. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer also consulted with two larger, multifaceted NGOs, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), to discuss their programs on the Burmese border and to get their perspective on the plight of Burmese female refugees and displaced persons. Sally Thompson of TBBC gave a detailed historical, sociological, and geographic picture of the Burmese border situation based on her two decades of experience and the many issues that have an impact on women, ranging from landmines to sex work in refugee camps. Abby Erikson, who runs the IRC Gender Based Violence program in Mae Hong Son, addressed the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault in the camps. She described the refugee camps as "perfect storms" for violence, due to substance abuse, depression, and the warehousing of individuals for years on end. She also spoke about IRC's efforts to engage on access to justice issues, including both inter-camp alternative

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dispute resolution and within the Thai system, with provincial authorities.

¶10. (SBU) Finally, Verveer met with Dr. Alfred Hannig of Alliance for Financial Inclusion (AFI) in order to discuss the financial inclusion of women. AFI is a major Gates Foundation grantee headquartered in Bangkok; it works with 70 Central Banks and other governmental actors to develop innovative solutions to allow the 2.5 billion "unbanked" people in the world to be able to use financial institutions.

AFI's goal is to bring 50 million people into the banking system over the next four years. Ambassador Verveer and Dr. Hannig discussed regional projects extensively, and she encouraged him to follow the model of women's success in microenterprise and microcredit programs and target them in the new world of financial inclusion initiatives, a suggestion that triggered AFI engagement with relevant contacts at Post.

INTERACTION WITH INFLUENTIAL INTERLOCUTORS

¶11. (U) During a December 7 lunch meeting, Ambassador Verveer met with all the major United Nations agencies located in Thailand that address women's issues in the region. Ambassador Verveer discussed human trafficking, migrant workers, and violence against women with representatives from UNIFEM, UNICEF, ILO, OHCHR and ESCAP. She challenged them to coordinate their work more closely.

¶12. (SBU) At a December 7 roundtable with Thailand's most prominent champions for women's rights, Ambassador Verveer discussed political and economic opportunities for women and the challenges they face in Thailand. The interlocutors included Professor Amara Phongsaphit, former Chulalongkorn University professor and current Chair of Thailand's National

Human Rights Commission (NHRC); Dr. Phutsadi Thamthai, a Democrat MP and a longtime politician and rights advocate; and Maytinee Bhongsvej, the Executive Director of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW). After Ambassador Verveer was briefed on the background of these organizations and institutions, she focused on potential areas for improvement in Thailand, including quotas for equal participation of women in local governments, an initiative that had enjoyed great success in India. Verveer highlighted resources that could be useful, such as the Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum, and she encouraged the women to use economic entry points to increase opportunity and start dialogue with male decisionmakers.

¶13. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer concluded her trip with a dinner meeting with longtime friend, and former senior Thai official and rights advocate Dr. Saisuree Chutikul. Along with Phil Robertson, former labor consultant and soon-to-be Asia Deputy Director for Human Rights Watch, Ambassador Verveer and Saisuree discussed the new developments in ASEAN, including both the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and Saisuree's participation in the working group that had recently drafted the Terms of Reference for the nascent ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). Ambassador Verveer intends to find ways to engage with ACWC on issues and projects once it is launched.

¶14. (U) Ambassador Verveer's staff has cleared on this cable.
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